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'Why Are We Allowing This?': PFAS Chemicals Costing Society $17.5 Trillion

Factoring in soil and water remediation, monitoring of pollution and healthcare costs associated with a number of health problems linked to per- and polyfluorinated substances, or PFAS, the cost to society of using the chemicals totals about $17.5 trillion every year, according to a new report.

By Common Dreams

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By Julia Conley

An upcoming report by Sweden-based organization ChemSec will detail the costs of the continued use of so-called "forever chemicals" which go overlooked by their manufacturers — the "societal" price that individuals and governments pay as the chemicals remain in the environment long after they are used in a range of products.

Factoring in soil and water remediation, monitoring of pollution and healthcare costs associated with a number of health problems linked to per- and polyfluorinated substances (PFAS), the cost to society of using the chemicals totals about $17.5 trillion every year.

ChemSec has worked with investment firms to pressure companies to eliminate the use of PFAS, which have earned the nickname "forever chemicals" because they do not naturally degrade and have been detected in breastmilk, wildlife and drinking water samples.

Major manufacturers of PFAS include Chemours, Solvay, Daiki, Honeywell, Bayer and 3M — the last of which announced this year it will discontinue the use of the synthetic compounds.

While manufacturers typically prioritize their profit margins and shareholder rewards over public health and safety, ChemSec found that these companies bring in relatively little money each year from using PFAS, compared to their cost to society.

The use of forever chemicals yields only about $4 billion each year, according to The Guardian, which reported on ChemSec's findings ahead of the release of the analysis.

"If you compare the profits that they make and the cost to society — it's ridiculous," Peter Pierrou, communications director for ChemSec, told The Guardian.

When accounting for the societal cost of using PFAS to make a range of products heat-, water- and stain-resistant, the price of the chemicals is more than $20,400 per kilogram rather than the recognized average market price of about $20.75.

"Why are we allowing this? $17.5 TRILLION [in] societal cost so that industry can make billions," said the Environmental Media Association in response to the findings, which will be released with more detail in "a couple of weeks," according to ChemSec.

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Health-related social costs of PFAS include treatment for cancers, thyroid disease, kidney dysfunction, birth defects and autoimmune diseases, all of which have been linked to low levels of exposure.

The drinking water of at least 200 million Americans is believed to be contaminated with forever chemicals, and the compounds have become ubiquitous throughout Europe as well.

ChemSec's analysis will also examine the use of PFAS in "essential" versus "non-essential cases."

The European Union (EU) in February proposed a ban on the chemicals in products for which manufacturers have identified alternative, non-toxic substitutes that can also repel water, heat and stains.

The organization has made some progress in appealing to manufacturers to end their use of PFAS by pointing to the chemicals' cost to society.

Late last year it organized a letter signed by investment firms that hold $11 trillion in assets in the EU warning that companies risk threatening "public health, the environment, and shareholder value" if they continue to use forever chemicals.

"There is particular concern about PFAS, often found in cosmetics, furniture, carpeting, non-stick pans, and waterproof jackets, which accumulate in the environment and cause health impacts for generations," the investment firms warned.

"Growing awareness of these risks has triggered a surge in lawsuits, which could cost chemicals companies as much as $30 billion."

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